**Off of Rough Streets, Into a Haven for Learning - Fifty years and 6,000 students later, a Chicago church’s free-tutoring program carries on.**

By

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Oct. 9, 2014 8:39 p.m. ET

On a crisp-as-an-apple-slice autumn afternoon in Chicago, a man named Tylus Allen looked around a softly lighted chapel and said, “When I first came here, it was because I heard this was where people were willing to help you.”

He is 24 now, a clerk at a downtown hospital. When he began evening visits to the Fourth Presbyterian Church, he was a fifth-grader who lived many grim miles away. His father was in prison. He was a boy who yearned to learn, to better himself, but wasn’t sure how. “I was hoping to find people who wouldn’t give up on me,” he said.

He came to the right place. The church, on a postcard-glamorous North Michigan Avenue corner, has, for 50 years, provided a tutoring program for children as young as first graders. Most of the boys and girls, often from the city’s poorest and most violent neighborhoods, are African-American. Most of the volunteer tutors are white, many of them professional men and women.

On this afternoon hundreds of them—former pupils like Mr. Allen, current pupils, present and past tutors—were gathering at the church to celebrate half a century of lives made better. The premise of what goes on there on weeknights is simple: The children seek one-on-one help with the basics of mathematics and reading and writing. They don’t always get that kind of individual attention in their public schools. There are successful men and women willing to sit down with them at the church and share what they have always taken for granted: the ability to add and subtract and divide, the ability to spell and to read with understanding.

I first reported on the church’s tutoring program 25 years ago, and then, as now, I was most struck by the devotion on both sides. On the coldest Chicago winter nights, in drenching rain and biting winds, the children would arrive for their tutoring sessions right on time. So would the volunteer tutors. Attendance was typically 100%.

“At first, the children don’t even know exactly what they’re hoping for,” said Stefani Turken, who is in her 22nd year of tutoring. “But little by little, they see that there is a different world available to them, that they can dream of something better. That if you want it to, life can change.”

Tamatha Webster, a single mother from Chicago’s West Side, said she enrolled her daughter in the tutoring program—it has always been free of charge—when the girl was 6. “She was going to a school where there was so much disruption in classes—children being rude and disrespectful to the teachers. She was trying to block all that out, and learn, but it was very hard.”

Most of the tutors, not all of whom are church members, have just finished a full day at work. “We never start by just opening the books,” said Jon Findley, a bank data-base manager who has been volunteering for 24 years. “These kids bring their day with them. So you listen. It’s important that they know someone wants to hear about their lives. I don’t want to be another person who lets them down.”

Since the program started in 1964—one night a week, that first year, in the church basement—more than 6,000 children have been taught. Now tutoring is available four nights a week. The children who journey downtown from some of the city’s bleakest, most dangerous neighborhoods could be excused for complaining about the hand life has dealt them. But complaining is easy; working to better oneself is hard. The volunteers could be excused—even commended—if they chose only to give money to charities instead. But writing a check is easy; being the person who does something—the one who shows up—is hard.

The rewards, though, are lasting. Tamatha Webster’s daughter no longer has to struggle to learn in chaotic classrooms. She has been a faithful attendee on tutoring nights for seven years now, and because of her intelligence and diligent work has been awarded a scholarship to one of Chicago’s finest private schools.

Her name is Brenna. She said that one of the happiest moments in her life was when, during her first year of tutoring, she finished in second place in a spelling bee, with her mother watching. Brenna aspires to become a pediatrician.

During her early years in the program, she said, on blizzardy days at her public elementary school she would look out the window at the swirling snow. “I told myself that no matter what, I was going to make it to tutoring that night,” she said. “I hoped it wouldn’t be snowed out. There was never a time that I didn’t get there. And there was never a time when they weren’t there waiting.”

*Mr. Greene is the author, most recently, of “Late Edition: A Love Story” (St. Martin ’s Griffin, 2010).*